

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 PM-04 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 L-03

PRS-01 CIAE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00 SAM-01 ACDA-07 IO-13

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9208

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

USMISSION USUN

USIA WASHDC

DIA WASHDC

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 5535

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE

SUBJECT: SYRIAN STRATEGY IN LEBANON

1. SUMMARY.

PERIOD LEADING UP TO PROJECTED SEPTEMBER 23 TRANSFER OF POWER FROM FRANGIE TO SARKIS WILL BE ONE OF HIGH RISK FOR ASAD IN HIS EFFORT TO IMPLEMENT HIS PREVIOUSLY-ANNOUNCED STRATEGY IN LEBANON OF RESTORING SECURITY AND PREVENTING PARTITION. LEBANESE CHRISTIANS, IRAQIS, EGYPTIANS AND ISRAELIS ALL HAVE POTENTIAL CAPABILITY EXPLOIT WEAKNESSES IN SARG POSITION. CHRISTIAN DECISION TO DECLARE DE JURE PARTITION OR TO PREVENT SARKIS' ASSUMPTION OF POWER WOULD

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BE PARTICULARLY HARD BLOW TO COUNTER AND WOULD

UNDERMINE PUBLIC JUSTIFICATION FOR SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN
LEBANON. END SUMMARY.

2. ASAD IS ENTERING CRUCIAL PERIOD IN WHICH HE WILL EXPECT
SCHEDULED HANDOVER OF OFFICE BY FRANGIE TO SARKIS TO TAKE
PLACE AND AT SAME TIME KEEP HIS OWN PREVIOUSLY STATED SYRIAN
POLICY OBJECTIVES INTACT. AS HE RETURNS FROM COLOMBO, HAVING TAKEN
SOUNDING ON ACCEPTABILITY OF HIS AIMS TO KEY THIRD WORLD
STATES, HE MUST ASSURE SUCCESSFUL ASSUMPTION OF POWER OF SARKIS.
HE WILL HAVE AT HIS DISPOSAL DIPLOMATIC TOOLS OF PERSUASION,
WHICH HE ALREADY EMPLOYING TO WHITTLE DOWN SUPPORT FOR JUMBLAT
AMONG TRADITIONAL MUSLIM LEADERS AND DRUZE COMMUNITY. THE
NEGOTIATIONS CULMINATING IN JULY'S SYRO-PALESTINAIN ACCORD REAFFIRMED
PALESTINAIN COMMITMENT TO ABIDE BY CAIRO AGREEMENT. ASAD
WILL BE RELYING UPON THIS INTER ALI TO COORDINATE SYRIAN
POSITIONS WITH LEBANESE CHRISTIANS. ASAD UNDOUBTEDLY HAS
DRAWN UP MILITARY STRATEGY TO COMPLEMENT HIS DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS.
WE HAVE HEARD VIA CONFIDANT OF PRIMIN KHULAYFAWI
THAT ASAD HAS OBTAINED APPROVAL OF HIS SENIOR MILITARY ADVISORS,
WHO ACCORDING TO THIS SOURCE REMAIN LOYAL TO PRESIDENT, FOR
RENEWED SYRIAN MILITARY OFFENSIVE AGAINST LEFTISTS/PALESTINIANS
IF THIS IS NECESSARY TO REACH FINAL SETTLEMENT OF CRISIS.

3. ASAD'S ABILITY TO COUNTER CHALLENGES TO HIS LEADERSHIP
WHILE PRESERVING HIS BASIC OBJECTIVES IN LEBANON WILL BE
SOBERLY TRIED DURING COMING MONTH. COSTS OF ASSISTING REFUGEES
AMONG THE NEARLY ONE MILLION WHO FLED TO SYRIA, IN ADDITION
TO COSTS OF MAINTAINING MILITARY FORCES IN LEBANON REMAIN
STEADY FINANCIAL DRAIN; THESE REFUGEES COMPRISE POTENTIALLY
SERIOUS SECURITY THREAT TO REGIME ALREADY BESET BY INTERNAL
PROBLEMS. RELATIONSHIPS WITH NORMALLY FRIENDLY ARAB, THIRD
WORLD AND EUROPEAN STATES HAVE BEEN FRAYED BY EFFECTIVENESS OF
PALESTINIAN LEFTIST PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN
AGAINST SYRIAN ACTIONS IN LEBANON. ASAD BADLY NEEDS A SUCCESS
IN LEBANON WHICH HE CAN PLAUSIBLY CLAIM HAS JUSTIFIED SYRIAN
INVOLVEMENT AND SACRIFICES.

4. WHILE ASAD HAS SOME GOOD CARDS TO PLAY IN COMING MONTH,
IT SEEMS TO US IN DAMASCUS THAT BOTH HIS ACKNOWLEDGED OPPONENTS
AND HIS PROFESSED ALLIES WILL BE IN STRONG POSITION TO

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EXPLOIT WEAKNESSES IN HIS POSITION. ACCORDING TO REPORTS
WE HAVE SEEN FROM BEIRUT, THERE IS SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF
FERMENT WITHIN MARONITE RANKS ON QUESTION WHETHER
SARKIS WILL BE PERMITTED TO REPLACE FRANGIE, NOT TO MENTION
DEGREE OF AUTHORITY THEY WILL CONCEDE TO HIM. SENSITIVITY
TO SYRIAN INTERESTS IN THIS MATTER SHOWN BY PHALANGE IS NOT
APPARENTLY MATCHED BY CHAMOUNISTS.

5. IN VIEW OF HEAVY SYRIAN INVESTMENT IN CANDIDACY OF SARKIS, ASAD WOULD BE SEVERELY EMBARRASSED BY SUCCESSFUL MARONITE ATTEMPT TO PREVENT TRANSFER OF POWER. MARONITES COULD ALSO UNDERCUT ASAD'S JUSTIFICATION FOR SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON--PREVENTION OF PARTITION--BY DECLARING DE JURE PARTITION OF COUNTRY. EVEN CONTINUED MEASURES TO BOLSTER DE FACTO PARTITION OF LEBANON WHICH STOPPED SHORT OF DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENT MARONITE NATION, IF UNACCOMPANIED BY ACTIONS TO DEMONSTRATE CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT TO UNITED LEBANON, WOULD EMBARRASS SYRIANS.

6. THIRD, PUBLIC FLAUNTING BY LEBANESE CHRISTIANS OF MARONITE-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP WOULD PROVIDE ASAD'S DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN CRITICS WITH SHARPER PROPAGANDA KNIFE THEY HAVE ALREADY USED AGAINST ASAD.

7. DISPATCH OF SUPPLIES BY EGYPTIANS, IRAQIS, LIBYANS AND SOVIETS TO THEIR CLIENTS IN LEBANON AS WELL AS POLITICAL ESPOUSAL OF LEFTIST/PALESTINIAN CAUSE CONSTITUTES FURTHER CONSTRAINTS ON SYRIAN CAPABILITY TO ACHIEVE ITS OBJECTIVES DURING THIS PERIOD. THESE LINKS COULD BECOME "TRIP WIRES" WHICH MIGHT ASCALATE THE INVOLVEMENT OF THOSE STATES AGAINST SYRIA. THIS PARTICULARLY TRUE IN CASE OF IRAQIS AND, TO LESSER EXTENT, EGYPTIANS. PRESENCE OF IRAQI TROOPS IN LEBANON COULD LEAD TO PRESSURES ON GOI TO EITHER INCREASE SIZE OF FORCES OR PULL OUT OUT ALTOGETHER IF TROOPS UNABLE TO CARRY OUT THEIR ASSIGNED MISSION. PAST SYRIAN REACTION TO SIMILAR PRESSURES SERVES AS REMINDER THAT EVENTS HAVE WAY OF OVERCOMING EVEN BEST INTENTIONS TO EXERCISE SELF-RESTRAINT. SYRO-IRAQI CLASH IN LEBANON COULD QUICKLY GENERATE SERIOUS MILITARY CONFRONTATION ALONG SYRO-IRAQI BORDER.

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8. ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF SOUTH LEBANON, SEEMINGLY UNLIKELY AT PRESENT TIME, COULD CAUSE GRAVE REPERCUSSIONS AGAINST DAMASCUS REGIME WHOSE OWN INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON WOULD BE PERCEIVED BY MANY AS CREATING FAVORABLE CONDITIONS FOR ISRAELI INTERVENTION. (CONVERSELY, ASAD COULD CONCEIVABLY EXPLOIT SUCH ISRAELI ACTION TO RALLY ARAB SUPPORT.)

9. WE CONCLUDE THAT PRESSURES ON ASAD WHICH SUBSIDED SOMEWHAT WITH ENTRY OF AL MEDIATORS AND TROOPS EARLIER THIS SUMMER, WILL AGAIN BEGIN TO MOUNT AS SEPTEMBER 23 APPROACHES. PALESTINIANS AND LEFTISTS HAVE APPARENTLY USED RECENT INTERLUDE TO REEQUIP AND REORGANIZE THEMSELVES IN PREPARATION FOR POSSIBLE MAJOR BATTLE. THEY FEAR AND MISTRUST SYRIAN CAPABILITIES AND INTENTIONS, BUT DESPITE JUMBLATT'S BLUSTER MAY PREFER NOT TO RESUME FIGHTING IF

DAMASCUS GIVES THEM OPTION. CHRISTIANS TO SOME EXTENT
ALSO EVINCE SUSPICION THAT THEIR SYRIAN ALLIES AT SOME
FUTURE POINT WILL TURN ON THEM AND REVERT TO THEIR ORIGINAL
ROLE AS PATRON OF LEBANESE LEFT; WE QUESTION
WHETHER ASAD COULD MANAGE ANY EARLY MAJOR SHIFT IN HIS
POLICY GIVEN PRESENT DEGREE OF HIS COMMITMENT TO
CHRISTIANS. WHILE WE DO NOT ARGUE THAT THE WEEKS LEADING
UP TO PROJECTED ASSUMPTION OF POWER BY SARKIS SEPTEMBER 23
WILL NECESSARILY PRESENT ANYTHING SO DRAMATIC AS A "LAST
CHANCE" FOR ASAD TO DEMONSTRATE EFFICACY OF HIS LEBANESE
INITIATIVE, THAT PERIOD PROMISES TO HAVE MAJOR IMPACT UPON
HIS CONTINUED ABILITY TO PURSUE SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT THERE ALONG
PREVIOUSLY OUTLINED COURSE.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS, CIVIL DISORDERS, POLITICAL SITUATION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 20 AUG 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976DAMASC05535
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760319-1173
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760835/aaaabeap.tel
Line Count: 183
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 10 MAY 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <10 MAY 2004 by ElyME>; APPROVED <11 MAY 2004 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SYRIAN STRATEGY IN LEBANON
TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE, (ASAD, HAFIZ)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006